



Leopards bag a superb double

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England Leopards had a superb night in the European Team Championships qualifying campaign as the women won 3-2 in Slovenia and the men overcame Netherlands 3-0 at home.

The women's result, with two wins for Tin-Tin Ho and one for Kelly Sibley ensures they finish second in their group and therefore qualify for the play-offs.

With the men already assured of second spot in their group, it means both teams will face home and away matches in April to determine which division they will feature in at the Championships in Luxembourg later this year.

And, subject to confirmation, both England teams will play on the same night in the home leg in Preston on April 11, with Slovakia the opponents for England men. The women's opponents will be Spain.

England v Netherlands

David McBeath was given the honour of leading off the England charge, up against left-hander Rajko Gommers.

And he made a confident start, winning the first three points of the match and never looking back on the way to taking it 11-7.

It was 11-8 in the next game as McBeath continued to look sharp, with very few unforced errors, and the theme continued for much of the third.

Only at 10-6 did he begin to wobble, and a time-out at 10-8 did not do the trick as Gommers, sporting a headband in Dutch orange, won the next four points to take it 12-10, aided by some hitherto uncharacteristic errors.

But McBeath was quick to get it back together, racing into a 7-0 lead in the fourth. His opponent made inroads – one particular forehand winner drew admiration from the crowd – but, aided by an edge to bring up his fifth match point, McBeath closed out a largely front-foot performance 11-6.

Liam Pitchford faced Laurens Tromer in game 2 in a battle between two players of similar physique.

The Dutchman was quick out of the blocks, building up a 9-3 lead. Pitchford hung in with four points in a row and then saved three game points to level at 10-10.



Liam Pitchford on the table in Stoke (picture by Michael Loveder)

Another game point to Tromer was saved, a Dutch time-out followed at 12-11. That one was again saved. A brutal forehand brought up yet another game point and it was taken – 14-12 to Tromer.

There was never much in the second and Tromer was first to a game point again at 10-9, saved by a cracking cross-court forehand from the Englishman. Then at last a game point for Pitchford; he forced Tromer to go long and it was 1-1.

Any thoughts of the tide having turned were banished as Tromer continued to perform at a high level and he re-took the lead, 11-9 in the third.

When Tromer led the fourth 6-3, it was Pitchford's turn to take a time-out. That helped him close up but at a huge net cord at 7-7 helped Tromer and a service winner at 9-9 brought him match point. That was saved as the Dutchman went long and two more points levelled it up for Pitchford.

The decider ebbed and flowed but it was Pitchford who brought up a match point first at 10-9. A great block saved it and a backhand flick gave Tromer his chance. But his receive then went into the net. Pitchford put a receive in the net, match point No 3 for Tromer, again saved as Tromer netted. Another net gave Pitchford his second match point and this time he powered through Tromer's defences to make it 2-0.

If that was dramatic, Paul Drinkhall's 3-0 win over Ewout Oostwouder was the opposite as the national champion proved far too strong, as shown in the 11-4, 11-2, 11-6 scoreline to complete the 3-0 victory.



Paul Drinkhall serves against Ewout Oostwouder (picture by Michael Loveder)

David McBeath said:

"It was a great feeling leading off. Cookie asked me if I was all right with that and I often play the first match in Sweden (for club side Eslov) so it was no problem. I was a bit more nervous than normal but being nervous is a good thing. At 2-0 and 10-6 up when I didn't close it out it made me a bit nervous in the fourth but I got a good start and managed to close it that time."

Liam Pitchford said:

"I knew he was going to come out with nothing to lose. I'm in a place where I'm not playing my best but I'm trying to find something in every match, and today was a good opportunity to do that. I played some good stuff in parts but not as clever in others and he took his chance. Fair play to him, he played really well but somehow I came through it in the end."

Paul Drinkhall said:

"After the Nationals I was mentally in a good place and I tried to keep my focus and my game followed. It was a good all-round performance. We're getting stronger in depth. David's had some good performances recently

and we've known he's got the game. We've been waiting for him to come through and now he's starting to believe more in himself – and he showed that tonight.”

Slovenia v England

Tin-Tin Ho spearheaded England's come-from-behind 3-2 victory to clinch a play-off place.

Kelly Sibley lead off against Alex Galic, a player she knows well from their time in the French league with Lys Lannoy. It was a reasonably tight match, as expected, and Sibley was edged out 3-0 (11-9, 11-6, 13-11).

When Ho was 2-0 down to Ana Tofant, it looked bleak, but the national champion powered back to win 3-2 (11-7, 11-9, 9-11, 5-11, 8-11).

Maria Tsaptsinos had a couple of tight sets against the experienced Manca Fajmut but ultimately lost 3-0 (11-9, 11-9, 11-4), but Ho tied it up again by seeing off Galic in fine style 3-1 (11-7, 11-9, 9-11, 11-7).

It was left to Sibley to bring it home and she duly obliged in three straight against Tofant (11-9, 11-5, 12-10) and England had repeated their triumph from Medway in November.

Kelly Sibley said:

“The first match, we know each other so well and it was quite close even though it was 3-0. I was disappointed not to get us off to a good start but Tin-Tin battled really well to win 3-2 and we felt really positive after that.

“Maria had some chances but Fajmut used her experience and then Tin-Tin just carried on the momentum she gained in the first match and played really well again. Alex sneaked the third but Tin-Tin never let her head drop and tactically was very clever.

“Then I thought I played tactically very well, she was struggling with my slow spin, and won 3-0 to take us through which was obviously what we were looking for. We knew it was going to be very tough and we're pleased we were mentally strong enough.

“Spain is going to be tough again but we honestly believe if we play well as a team – and our team spirit is one of the best in Europe – we can definitely beat them.

“We've had two matches where we won from 2-1 down. We never gave up and kept pushing and that gives us confidence.”

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